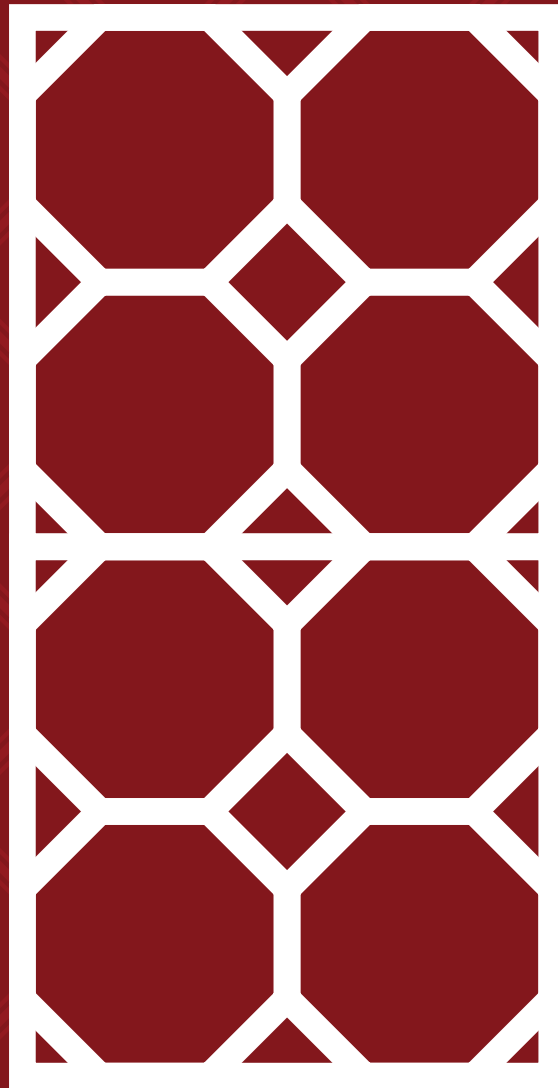


A PERFECT GENTLEMAN

Windows into a virtuous world



Advice for Braxted Park, Essex,
an English Grand Tour masterpiece

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BRAXTED: Robert Taylor's first country house

Braxted Park has the immense distinction of being the first country house project of Sir Robert Taylor (1714–1788). Taylor was spotted and his career made by High Sheriff of Essex, Peter Du Cane Sr, who engaged him to improve his London mansion in St James' Square, before bringing him to his country seat, Braxted Lodge, in 1752. Taylor became one of the most important architects for London and the English country gentry in the Georgian Age. His memorial in Westminster Abbey acclaims him as 'in the first class of British architect'. Du Cane was a Director of the Bank of England, and Taylor was soon made Architect to the Bank. Taylor was also a sculptor of great skill, and both planned and carved the tympanum of Mansion House and the Lord Mayor's State Coach, making him second only to Christopher Wren in visual impact upon the pageantry of the City of London. Taylor's signature in his country houses was a special design of window, and this account will tell its deep and rich story.

THE ROBERT TAYLOR WINDOW

Taylor's signature architectural feature was the use of a fretwork of glazing bars in his windows – both in the City and the country – making a pattern of large octagons and small poised squares seated between them. This window type was used for the very first time at Braxted, but can be seen in other masterpieces of gentry building by Taylor across the route of the Grand Tour of England, including the jewel-like Harleyford Manor (Buckingham) and Barlaston Hall (Staffordshire).



Figure 1. Windows at Braxted Park, Essex.

SEATS OF LEARNING: the Cambridge origins of Taylor's pattern

Great Braxted is blessed with a beautiful and ancient church – All Saints – which lies within the perimeter of the park. An even greater blessing is the Living of the church, which has for centuries belonged to the Master and Fellows of Corpus Christi (or 'Bene't') College, Cambridge. The Living is the right to appoint the Rector, who then lives from the income of the church lands in the parish. Braxted earned a fair income, and the Rectors of All Saints have often been drawn from the Fellows of the College in holy orders. Corpus Christi College is special because it houses the memory of Anglicanism – the library of Matthew Parker, first Archbishop of Canterbury in Elizabeth I's Church of England. The Parker Library contains the world's finest collection of Anglo-Saxon manuscripts, as well as all of the foundational documents of the Church of England.

Parker left these books to the College in his will, and so his friend Nicholas Bacon (father to the famous philosopher Francis Bacon) built a chapel with a new library above it to receive the collection. The chapel's ceiling had plaster pendants hanging down, as if the theological power of the books above constantly dripped and flowed down into the chapel beneath, and the floor was one of the very first floors to feature the pattern of octagons and poised squares – a floor so important it was preserved through two rebuildings of the chapel and can still be walked upon today. Robert Taylor took the design for his signature windows at Braxted from the celebrated pavement of the chapel of Corpus Christi College, where the Du Cane sons also studied.

THE ROYAL CONNECTION: the pattern at Westminster Abbey

The pattern at Corpus Christi was inspired by the Coronation of Elizabeth I, about which Archbishop Matthew Parker wrote to his queen in a special manuscript gift now housed in the Parker Library. This letter speaks about courtiers as different gemstones, with the Sovereign as the chief jewel. Research by Byrga Geniht has shown that the Coronation Pavement made for Henry III in the thirteenth century is based around the idea of the rhombic dodecahedron – a special three-dimensional shape that is pointed to in the geometry of the pavement.

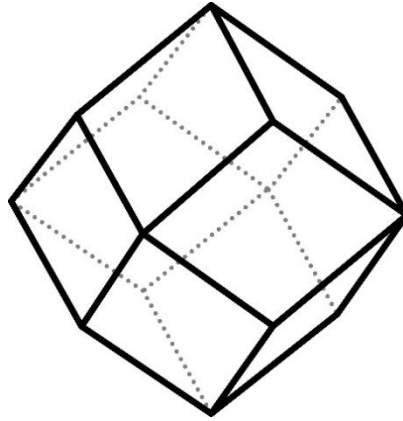


Figure 2. A rhombic dodecahedron.

The rhombic dodecahedron possesses twelve identical faces, shaped as rhombuses. It can be constructed from two identical cubes by splitting one into six pyramids from the centre and fixing the square base of each pyramid one face of the other cube. You no longer have 24 triangular pyramid sides, but 12 rhombuses. We see allusions to this in English philosophical architecture, from the double cube pedestals at the Gate of Honour at Gonville and Caius College in Cambridge (England's foremost sculptural monument to the idea of academic excellence), to the 110' x 55' x 55' design of Inigo Jones' Banqueting House at Whitehall Palace (famously, where King Charles I was martyred) – another royal connection.

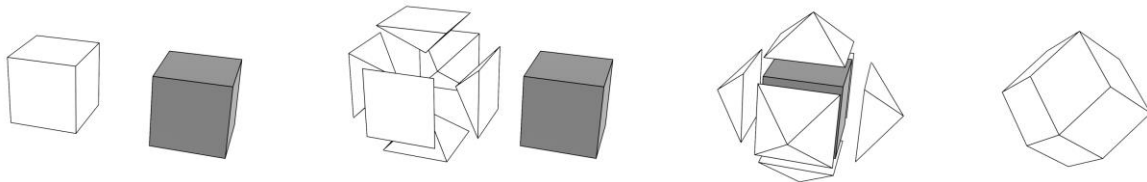


Figure 3. Left to right: Two cubes identical in size; The white cube is split into pyramids; the pyramids are attached to the faces of the black cube; the resulting rhombic dodecahedron.

The cube-based geometry of rhombic dodecahedra gives them the rare property of being able to fill three-dimensional space with no gaps (tessellate). This attribute greatly expanded their influence on British architecture.

The pattern of octagons and poised squares (which would later become Taylor's window pattern) features centrally and prominently in the Westminster Retable, England's oldest altarpiece, which dates from the end of the reign of Henry III or the beginning of his son Edward I's reign. Today this altarpiece can be seen in the Queen's Diamond Jubilee Galleries at Westminster Abbey. The two designs

achieve similar things; the Coronation Pavement is designed around projections of the rhombic dodecahedron onto cubes and octahedra, but the Taylorian design is actually a slice through rhombic dodecahedra filling three-dimensional space.

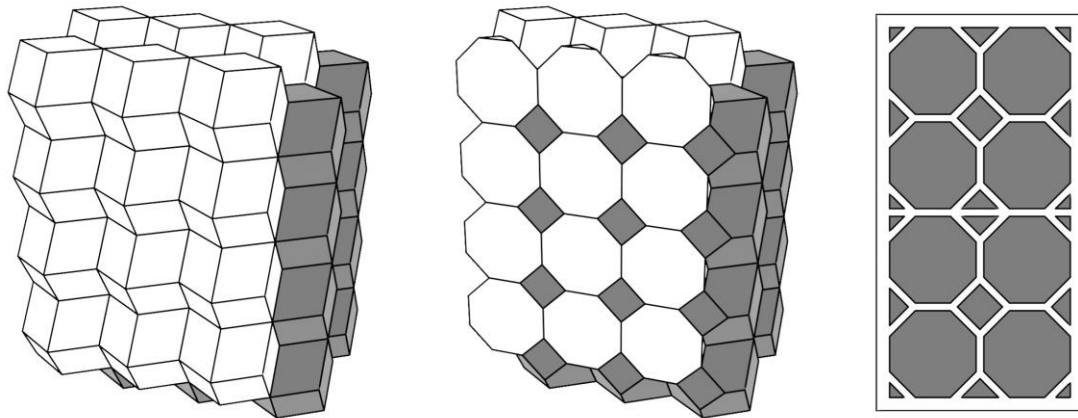


Figure 4. Left: massed rhombic dodecahedra; Centre: The same rhombic dodecahedra with a vertical section shown, creating a pattern of octagons and poised squares; Right: The Robert Taylor window.

JEWISH AND CHRISTIAN MORALS: garnet as allegory

The tessellation of rhombic dodecahedra is a powerful allegory for a harmonious society, in which everybody fits together. It is a more powerful allegory than just cubes fitting together. With simple cubes, layers can slide around over each other; rhombic dodecahedra, however, lock tightly together. Looking from another angle at a group of rhombic dodecahedra stuck together can show a surface of shallow triangular peaks and divots, arranged in hexagons, which is how bees interface two layers of their honeycomb – and humankind has always looked to the bees for inspiration in crafting a harmonious society.

Another place in nature that you can see the geometry of the rhombic dodecahedron is the garnet crystal. Garnets are almost always formed naturally as rhombic dodecahedra. This is not by splitting or shrinking – all the atoms must combine together in this way, and the mineral grows from the centre as atoms join the crystal structure. Garnets were used in the most important jewellery, weaponry and regalia during the birth of England and English Christianity in the Anglo-Saxon period. In the ancient world garnets were called ‘carbuncles’ or glowing embers. In the Book of Ezekiel in the Bible, the soul conformed to God, which can contribute to the New Jerusalem and a harmonious society, is called a glowing ember. To centuries of souls, the rhombic dodecahedral garnet has therefore been an emblem of divine goodness, social virtue, and wise, legitimate rulership. It is this profound virtue and authority that is embodied in the Taylor windows at Braxted Park.

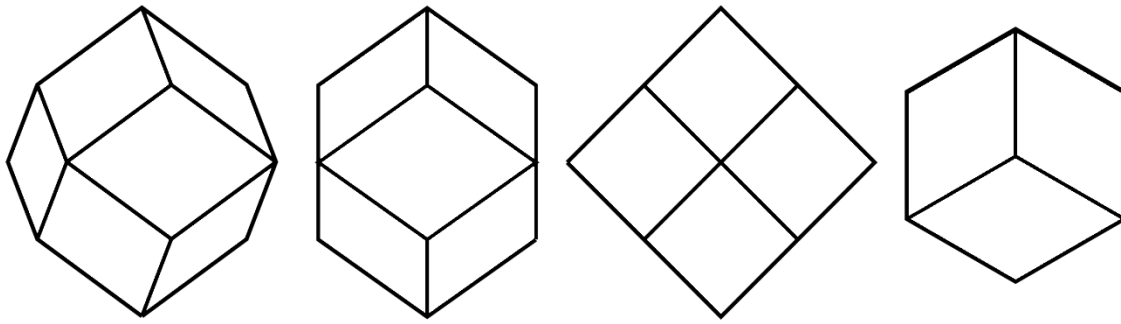


Figure 5. The rhombic dodecahedron in different orthographic views.

CLASSICAL PHILOSOPHY: the sophistication of Plato

Classical Pagan Athens was not ignorant of these mysteries and their call upon our virtue. In his discourse 'Timaeus', their foremost philosopher, Plato, explained how there are five elements, and each must be a three-dimensional shape. An atom of Earth, he said, was shaped as a cube. Fire was a tetrahedron. Water was an icosahedron. Air was an octahedron. Each of these is accompanied in the discourse by a long treatise on how to make the shapes geometrically, and why they are assigned the ways that they are; however Plato then had Timaeus proclaim, 'there remained yet a fifth solid which God used to embroider the zodiac', with no further elaboration. There was a taboo at Eleusis, the cult site to the pomegranate mystery outside Athens, in which the key to the immortality of the soul could be seen by all but not shared outside the temple – (but pomegranate arils of course look just like garnets, giving a symbol for the initiated).

Besides the Eleusinian taboo, there is another explanation as to Plato's terseness regarding his magical fifth element (or quintessence). We have already considered the Gate of Honour at Gonville and Caius College, Cambridge. This Elizabethan triumphal arch, designed by Dr John Caius, Master of the College and Royal Physician, was carved by the mason Theodore Haveus of Cleves, whose portrait hangs in the College today. This painting shows the mason in the beauty of full, black bearded youth, wearing cloth of silver, and holding a large pair of compasses for the triumph of his trade. Over his shoulder, however, is a head-sized bone-white pentagonal dodecahedron. This genre of portrait is a 'vanitas', and the bone-white pentagonal dodecahedron represents a skull. The first gate of Gonville and Caius College is the Gate of Humility – leaving behind the Euclidean perfection of the pentagonal dodecahedron, with its identical vertices. Despite its beauty, the pentagonal dodecahedron represents vanity and an egotism that is antisocial, as it cannot tessellate space. Next is the Gate of Virtue, and after this students may only pass through the final Gate of Honour when they embody the social harmony of the rhombic dodecahedron. So, in this reading, Plato presented a choice of soul-stuff

between atoms of pure vice and pure virtue – between doomed mortality and eternal salvation.

A GRAND TOUR TRIUMPH: Taylor's windows at Braxted

Only the English went to Italy on Grand Tour, for a change of weather and a curiosity about the remnants of the long-past ancients. Everybody else came to England to see the white heat of the Industrial Revolution, the miraculous abundance of the Agricultural Revolution, and the utopian, stable constitutional settlement. They sailed from the Rhine and landed at Mistley in Essex, where Robert Adam built a double-towered church like the Golden Gates of Jerusalem to greet them, and a vast spa complex to refresh themselves. The route of the Grand Tour took the Roman road through Colchester and Chelmsford to London, and thence up the Thames to Windsor, over land to Oxford and then the industrial Midlands, before looping through the Potteries and the Dukeries to return east to Cambridge, and back to the Stour estuary. Grand Tourists travelled clockwise, and Braxted Park, next to the Roman Road, was one of the first country houses they encountered. We now understand that Robert Taylor's signature windows were not just an advertisement for the greatness of English history and the constitution, but also heralded the core values and virtues of English civilization.

Italy plays second fiddle here. Yes, we agree that their architecture is beautiful, but we consider it (just as Colen Campbell, author of the 1715 'Vitruvius Britannicus', did) to be infected with moral decay. Italian proportions favour the Golden Ratio, and its irrational number Phi. Phi is the proportion that adds hipped roofs to the faces of a cube to make a pentagonal dodecahedron – Theodore Haveus' vanitas, his memento mori. The English, meanwhile, have consistently embraced the double cube, the pyramids on the faces of the cube, and one to the square root of two (the width to length of the rhombuses of our moral dodecahedron). Rather than Italian decadence, we embrace instead – like Jane Austen – the social quality of amiability, with a backbone of civic duty.

Taylorian windows are like a knighthood. Firstly, they are a sign of exemplary moral quality, but there are two aspects to this: they may be seen as reward and recognition for virtues already accomplished, but they are also a forward-looking pledge and a commitment to shared values. They swear an oath to future moral conduct in meaningful practical action. In short, Taylorian windows are one of the ultimate signs of a perfect English gentleman, and the ideal ethos with which to greet the representatives of all nations, at the start of their quest to understand the greatness of England.